

1 Day

by Nick Stokes

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1 Day

SHE IS A person who has good and bad days. Though days are rarely wholly good, and rarely wholly bad.

“The days are holy,” someone once said.

She is a woman, then, who has good and bad moments, though the good sometimes lasts longer than a moment, as often does the bad.

Misquote. Mosquito. Moscow. “The days are gods,” is what he said.

She is a girl who suffers from good and bad spells. Suffer? Does suffer apply equally to good and bad spells?

She is a red flower who suffers from good spells and rejoices in bad *spels*.

“You wrote that to be cute,” she tells on herself to herself.

“To have fun.”

“Was it fun?”

“Yes. What do I care about spelling and word choice? I’m not an English teacher.”

She giggles because she’s alone. She is an English teacher.

Emerson said it. She knows. She was withholding information, like any good teacher, to amuse herself. The days are Gods. God is dead. God is in the details. God gets a D because he’s always tardy, doesn’t do the reading, doesn’t contribute to discussion, and doesn’t give a shit. She’d flunk him, but she doesn’t want him in class again next year. He’d rather smoke dope and shoot spitballs and make eyes at the cute girls.

She understands. She’d rather do that too.

She eyes the pile of papers. Mostly they suck. They burst with a sad dearth of sustained persistence, a hyperkinetic digital hodgepodge of fluffy, popular, redundant, hormone-driven thought, and acne. Their independent thoughts conform to others’ independent thoughts. They lack textual evidence to support their assertions.

“What do you expect,” she asks herself, “you’re not reading Dostoyevsky.” They are reading *Crime and Punishment*. She wishes she’d assigned *The Idiot*. At least she doesn’t care for that one. She has learned that it is easier to bear the mangling of a story near to her heart if she doesn’t care for it.

She thinks about making a new letter grade with the top paper on the stack and rolling a J, but she hasn’t smoked pot in a decade and she has a dependent relationship with her job and she doubts it’d be the responsible decision with Max asleep upstairs. She believes in free choice, but she hasn’t encountered it lately, and she’d prefer that her 4-year-old not spark up for a while yet. She gets a beer.

She writes some things on some papers. Some advice on spelling, grammar, logic. She makes no suggestions about having worthwhile ideas, or pursuing worthwhile objectives. Spelling has rules, grammar has logic, logic has ... She corrects ellipses use. She invents some new letters to write at the top of the first pages. Or rather borrows, a CH from Spanish, an Å from Danish, an Æ from Latin; she doesn’t know how to invent a letter.

By the bottom of the stack she is skipping the thesis and playing hooky on the body and barely sneaking in for the conclusion. Again and again she regrets reading the last

sentence, but she does it anyway. Strata by strata, each one less illuminating than the one above, she scrapes away the mountain of papers and uses the waste to fill in the low spots of her sagging living room. She assimilates her valleys. She is tired of how they drain her.

Strip-mined, she retires to bed. She thinks, “Well, once again you’ve coughed up the coal to heat children’s thoughts into rising to spin the turbine to create the electricity that spins the world.”

Raskolnikov at one point thought, “To live in a square yard of space all your life is better than to die.”

She silently tells herself to be quiet. She’ll never sleep if she can’t shut-up.

At 4:30 a.m. she waits for the coffee pot to finish brewing. It is a kind of bliss to stand there in the black kitchen without thought and listen to water being boiled and bubbled and gurgled and gargled up a small tube by the expanding gases of the liquid-gas phase conversion, energized by a hidden electric heating element – and the water rains silently on cheap coffee grounds and leeches their flavor, caffeine, chemicals, and brown, and then jumps noisily first to splatter on the bottom of the glass pot and then to splash and disassociate then disappear into the deepening brown lake.

Twelve cups. Two days worth.

She grogs. Sometimes it pays for her to be inchoate. No, that’s a different word. Incoherent. She tries to return to passively watching the dripping, dirty water. It would be healthier for her to get more sleep. She’d be more stable, a better teacher, a better mother. She’d be better stabled, a better horse. But this – this absence while awake, this consciousness without thought, this is the bliss that mediates the remainder of the day. These few minutes, and the two hours of writing that follow, provide their own balance. And so she gets up before morning like a good farmer.

Not that she doesn’t know that these minutes and their pursuit provide no apples, no potatoes, no pigs to pile on the balance and raise the low side out of the dirt. That these massless minutes might be weight on the wrong side of the balance, like the accumulations of her thighs. That they, in their way, make the remainder of the day weigh on her more by insinuating that it doesn’t matter.

At the same time, she cannot be rid of the doubt that the reverse is true, that these first minutes are a waste of time, that she should be sleeping, and that it is all the other minutes of the day that matter.

Her moment of bliss has passed.

She carefully extricates Corelle bowls with green flowers and the large pot with flaking Teflon from the dish drainer to uncover her stained mug without waking Max. She pours coffee, spilling a few drops and leaving them. She sets the mug on the kitchen table without spilling and sits in a chair with peeling finish and a split seat. She sits at the table, sticky to her right at Max’s spot. She sits with a pen that was left in her classroom, a spiral notebook found in the Lost and Found, and her mug, a gift. She drinks coffee from the mug. As she drinks the coffee, air replaces it in the mug. Not nothing, but air.

She breathes. She’s always breathed, but she pays it attention for a moment.

She snorts and in her head shakes her head at herself like she is a pockmarked 16-year-old leaning back in his chair and staring into the buzz of a fluorescent bulb as she

talks.

Bliss isn't quite the right word, she decides, for this absence while present. Not decides – she knew already, has thought it all out before, but she thinks again about how it isn't exactly bliss, and about how she hasn't a more apt word.

“Why had he not killed himself?” Raskolnikov asked himself. Or rather the narrator asked. Dostoyevsky, then, asking Raskolnikov. Dostoyevsky asking himself. Or asking the reader.

She stops. She does not brave predawn dark to write another paper on “Crime and Punishment.”

Answers given by Raskolnikov: Pride. Cowardice. Instinctual habit.

Answer given, in the end, after thousands of other words, by the narrator: “He didn't understand that consciousness might be the promise of a future crisis, of a new view of life, and of his future resurrection.”

A paper unfurls before her, a paper she loves, a paper a joy to read, a paper arguing a point of view she hasn't heard argued a thousand times before, and it argues with erudition, without cursing or crying or name-calling or hurling unbreakable dishes. The paper calls the reliability of the narrator into question, as the narrator is nothing but a cardboard stand-in for the author, who was too busy puppeting his characters and gambling and raising money to pay off his bookies and having seizures that he wasn't not fond of to fully inhabit his main character and accept Raskolnikov's suicide as just, and that Raskolnikov, being an intellectual, and more than that, being self-conscious in a crippling way, to a degree that today would be certifiable and for which he would be prescribed a pantheon of drugs, and possessing a self-knowledge that most scholars and spiritual advisers and seekers of truth would envy, did understand the possibility of consciousness and had duly weighed it as a possible explanation as to why he had not thrown himself into the Neva after he murdered an innocent woman with an ax, but he concluded Dostoyevsky was blowing consciousness's promise out of all proportion to compensate for his own shortcomings and that he himself found consciousness a wanting restraint. Which would require Raskolnikov to be conscious of Dostoyevsky, a post-modern leap, as if off a bridge, Raskolnikov couldn't make because Dostoyevsky hadn't made it for the reasons of epileptic self-involvement enumerated above and because Raskolnikov isn't real and for other historical reasons that will remain unenumerated because the author realizes his or her argument has been circumnavigated, or circumvented, or circumcised and therefore further enumeration is a waste of time. Besides, Dostoyevsky spent years in exile in Siberia, as Raskolnikov will, so his credibility is hard to question.

She distracts herself. Conflation of author and narrator is the first great sin perpetrated against Kierkegaard. The second is no one understands him. The third is no one reads him. It's his own fault. He's nigh to impossible to read.

In light of the lack of a more worthwhile task, she chooses to account for her joys against the ticking clock. Clocks don't tick anymore; sometimes they hum because of their excess of electrons, but the gears and weights and pendulums and cuckoos and ticking are only in her head.

Joys in the last 24 hours:

Max waking up with a big smile and hug yesterday	20 s
Max giggling when tickled, then hiding under the covers while I tried to dress him, before it pisses me off	60 s
Peeing a horse-load during 2 nd period, 1 st period in the books	23 s
Eating lunch outside in the sun, near a strawberry tree	15 min

She reaches on that last one, but she needs minutes. Not that eating outside in the sun near the strawberry tree wasn't a kind of joy – she had been very hungry. She'd loaded up at the serve-yourself fajita bar in the cafeteria and actually got enough. And she was outside instead of in her windowless office or making awkward conversation with other faculty members, and the day was beautiful. She enjoyed it. Except immediately following the last bite, she'd had to go back inside, and the knowledge that she would have to go back inside molested the back of her neck like an expectant husband. Did it then count as joy? Maybe all joy pricks with pain.

Max yelps. He cries for her. A bad dream maybe. She can't know; she can't be in his head. She doesn't go. Too early yet. If he gets up now, he'll be a wreck and they'll hate each other. If she goes to him, he'll want to get up and be with her and it'll end in crying. She cannot think while he cries. He cries her name three, four, five times, then silence. He is getting better at not needing her.

She needs to loosen her joy guidelines or she will have to find a river or a bay or an ocean to jump into before Max wakes up. She had not counted on being in the black on this balance sheet, but she'd prefer to be in a position to recoup her losses if the market takes a turn for the better. Her assignment is to spend, but buying crap she doesn't need doesn't gain her a purchase on joy. The problem is mere existence has never been enough for her. Her currency is joy, happiness, bliss, illumination, transcendence, words that make her blush. She tries to stimulate the economy of her mind by wanting what it is impossible to possess, and that doesn't pay the bills.

Her overwritten metaphor doesn't make her money, but it makes her happy. That's okay, she'd rather be happy than money. She'd rather be belabored than worn and wrinkled and handled and wadded in pockets and coveted above all else.

Picking up Max after school, rapping with him to Heiruspecs and butchering "Quit my job so I can work more ..." and switching discs to Wilco, "Jesus don't cry, you can rely on me honey ..." and almost crying, okay crying, and Max asking what's wrong and me saying nothing and skipping the next song to rock out with him to "I'm the man who loves you."

15 min

She didn't relax her standards on that one. That had been unequivocal joy. Perhaps unequivocal because it had followed several hours of suck.

But that's about it for straight-up joy.

She has to believe the numbers don't mean what they say. Perhaps one second of joy is actually worth 100 seconds of non-joy. That's how the numbers play out in sex, if she's generous, as near as she can recall. If it's a 1:100 ratio, she'd still be in the red, she thinks, though she's not about to do the math. She smiles at herself, ever the shy girl.

She'd rather not know than calculate exactly how much one second of joy needs to be worth for her to break even.

"Dave would've done that for me," she doesn't quite say. It's too early to speak.

Another option to increase her net worth is to lump all non-negative, emotion-producing activities into the same category. Just a little accounting trick, a loophole, nothing illegal – why should only the rich be entitled? Bliss, joy, release, relief, absence, satiation, feeling useful and productive, zoning out.

She frets about being exposed in an audit. She smiles again – "Who says she doesn't smile?" she thinks – and thinks, "Who cares enough to expose me?" There is no oversight, no regulation. Loosen the strings on joy then, unhook the corset. Take a deep breath and expand your minutes into happinesses.

First 5 minutes of checking e-mail during free period

5 min

First 5 min of web surfing for summer gardening supplies during free period

5 min

First 5 min of talking to colleagues in faculty room during free period
(colleague-dependent)

5 min

First 5 min helping struggling student during free period, while still under
impression that we're making progress

5 min

Letting class out 5 min early without homework because didn't have time to
make copies of the worksheet during free period

5 min

Last class, with the lesson down so rote it was boring – delivered without
paying attention, without stressing, without being present, with the promise
of it being the last class of the day

50 min

Grading multiple-choice vocab quizzes

20 min

Running, pushing a 4-year-old in a chariot

30 min

Reading to Max before bed

15 min

Sleeping, not lying in bed not sleeping, but sleeping

5 hrs

Not half-bad, she thinks. But she won't add up the deposits and withdrawals. She just won't. That was Dave's job. She feels like she's in the black, and that's good enough for now.

It's a thing called faith. As Raskolnikov said, "I haven't faith, but I have just been weeping in mother's arms. I haven't faith, but I have just asked her to pray for me."

That's pretty accurate, she figures, which reminds her of what she forgot.

Writing, morning, pre-dawn. Every tick an addition to today on the front end
and a subtraction on the back end

2 hrs

Not half-bad at all. Not that she wouldn't mind more additions to the front end and

subtractions from her back end. Her daily income and accrued interest should equal her expenditures, inflation, and cost of living. Her goal isn't growth.

Aloud, for her first words of the day, with the sky lightening through the window, with the sun rising and the weight of the day settling like stars on her shoulders, she quotes someone who never existed, a Russian with a hell of a name, like all Russians, "And I was ready to consent to live in a square of space!"

At which there is a thump above of Max getting out of bed, the creak of his door opening, the thud of the toilet lid, the sound of piss cascading and then dripping into deep water, and then a thirsty "Mommy!"

She bursts into the bathroom and proclaims to be on the pot, "My life has not yet died with that old woman!"

He can't know that she's Raskolnikov, but he knows she is his mother having fun. He chortles and says, "Good morning Mommy!" and she picks him up and they hug. He drips a drop or two of urine on her threadbare T-shirt, which quickly absorbs the wet and clings to her belly, which she is aware of being a little weird, and he, the smiling and laughing charmer, rears back and smacks her in the face.

Dave would've smacked him back and asked him how he liked it, told him how if he was mean, no one wanted to be with him. But she – she swallows tears and tells him to put his pants on.

She changes into her work clothes, something more professional than an old, moist, pink T-shirt worn transparent that some ex-boyfriend won for her when she was in high school like 20 years ago. The next outfit in a rotation established so she won't have to stare into the overflowing abyss of the closet for minutes heaped upon minutes, and decide. Khaki slacks with a gray button-up whose collar flares over a black cardigan. Max is crying because he hit his head on the dresser while he spun to take off his pajama shirt. He likes helicopters, but that is something else. He spins like a dog chasing its tail to get some sort of better angle at pulling his arm through his sleeve. She smiles thinking about it. His cries mellow to whimpers as she buttons up her gray shirt and goes to him. Outside, the sun oranges. She wishes vaguely for a brooch that color.

They left late, for no particular reason. Probably because she sat at the table with her bowl of flakes and her Max and ate breakfast while they talked about going to the beach that weekend. It is only Wednesday, but they'll make it to the weekend, by God. It's only March, but if the calendar won't read summer they'll make their own.

She won't have time to turn on her computer and waste five minutes. She'll have time to walk into her office, drop off her bag and coat, grab the graded vocab quizzes, attendance sheet and participation sheet as cover, and hold the door for the last shuffling students, whose hands will be full of iPods and Starbucks, rebellious teenagers bucking the recession.

She drops Max off at daycare. Next year, kindergarten at her school if she can cough up the dough. She won't have to make this extra stop. A few minutes saved. Though this morning is quick and easy – he runs straight to the trains without a whimper and without looking back. He is Orpheus and she Eurydice and he doesn't look back but the gods lied; she can't escape Hades. She says "Goodbye" to his back and turns back to the car and closes her eyes. She backs into the busy street.

She drives, another oxygenated red blood cell driven through the clogged arteries of a glutted corpus, she deforming to fit through the microscopic capillaries of this fat city and deliver her deliverables, she, tiny and folded and therefore inward-looking, pushed by capillary pressure through another slightly larger, self-obsessed corpuscle, as seen from a planetary scale. And her planet, a blip on the universe's scale. And so it goes, Russian dolls. Painted pretty, but dolls.

She has to make a plan now, or she will walk into class, stand at the front of the room, and... What will she say? She'll take attendance. She'll hand back vocab quizzes with the words repugnance, rapture, anguish, suffering, joy, each exquisitely ill-defined. And then she'll say... What does she have to say about *Crime and Punishment*? What does she have to say? She will stand in front of them, all of them, every last one of them, in front of them with nothing to say, and she will say...

"I want to go home." But she can't say it. She can't speak, even to herself, alone in her Accord that's older than her students and gets better gas mileage.

Four blocks from school, she pulls into the shoulder and weeps. She tries to curl below the bottom edge of the driver side window to disappear from all the colleagues, all the parents, all the students, all the strangers driving by. She does not weep for Max, though there is that. She does not weep for Dave, though there is that, somewhere. She does not weep for Dostoevsky or Raskolnikov or Sonia or Lizaveta. She does not weep for anything or anyone.

She weeps because there is a ball of emptiness within her, collapsing on itself. Because there is a red dwarf within her, collapsing. A star collapsing. A sphere of emptiness, a point of infinite density, collapsing and collapsing and collapsing and she has acknowledged it, and because she has acknowledged and been unable to swallow the collapse again, she has to feed it tears, feed it her sorrow, feed it the fear of when tears alone will feed it no more. The mass, the emptiness in her grows, it pulses, its gravity waxes and she is pulled down and in and it throbs and she collapses and she feels it and waters it and sacrifices herself to it because she has no choice – it holds her down, its great weight atop her, and forces itself on her, it is inside her, she gives herself and allows herself to be crushed – that is the only way it ever goes away, no it never goes away, that is the only way it finishes and lets her pretend again it doesn't exist. She allows herself to be crushed, she becomes it becomes the weight becomes the emptiness becomes the pulse--

Finished, released, alive again. She is herself in the rearview mirror. Her eyes shine. Her tears have left trails. She fixes herself. She does not feel good; she feels bored out. She still does not want to go to school, but she can do it, and she does, because that is what she will be five minutes from now, at 8 a.m. on a Wednesday morning in March, a teacher contracted through the school year, uncommitted to the next, but with a mortgage

and insurance premiums and a son. There is no time to think of another way; she will be five minutes late. Regardless of time, she thinks of nothing; all her words have escaped her eyes and run down her face. Until she walks through the school door, she is nothing but the feeling, neither pleasurable nor painful, of a vacancy in her gut.

She is five minutes late. She takes attendance. She returns vocab quizzes. Some are disheartened, some pleased; most don't care. She gives them 20 minutes to read silently from where they left off. She knows that for many of them, where they left off was not where they are supposed to be.

She informs them that she is being generous, that they have a chance to either amend the conspicuous consumption of last night or to work on tonight's homework and earn time for tonight's consumption. "If you don't return my investment with interest, I will bearishly regulate class participation marks accordingly."

Nobody questions her word choice or finds it amusing. All 25 of them pull out their books and read, minus Harold, who hasn't been able to find his book for a week and has yet to figure out that *Crime and Punishment* is not a difficult book to procure, for example, at a bookstore. They are prep school kids, which doesn't mean they're earnest, but it means their parents are. Or else rich. Most are glad for a second chance, or a chance to get ahead. They are young and it is first period and a few just rolled out of bed and at least half stayed up late on the phone or playing video games or watching TV or socially networking online or texting – which she explained to them is not unlike taking shorthand notes, which only had the result that several wanted to text while she lectured rather than passively not listen – or because they had a track meet or did all their homework. The other half are tired because that's what people are, tired, and these are seniors learning to be people.

Rita has obviously already finished the book, and is rereading what was assigned for today so she can be better prepared. She is already the most prepared.

"Go on Rita, go get a beer at the corner store. Pound it and come back. They'll sell to you. You'll pass for 40."

She laughs alone behind her desk. A redefining of priorities. A few eyes lift to her, then drop again. She'd say it out loud if she had some balls.

She composes, sips coffee in synchrony with five 17-year-olds.

Ham, in the back of the room, should be in her less advanced class, which is studying *Hamlet*. He's in love. He hasn't done the reading. Instead of skipping ahead to today's reading so he can skate through discussion, he has returned to where he left off, approximately 100 pages behind the class, based on the unbalanced mass of pages on either side of his book's spine. And, she sees now, he isn't reading at all, but staring through his book to where he left off, which was his girlfriend's basement, his mouth on her nipple, his fingers under her waistband.

She wants to teach him how to fool his teachers, how to get by, how to fake it, so he can get on with the real business of life, loving. But that's not what she's paid for.

She sips coffee in synchrony with three 17-year-olds, except she brought hers from home. She wonders if she can complete the infidelity to the economy by growing coffee plants in the backyard and paying Max in dinner to pick beans. If the climate's too cold, they'll move to Costa Rica.

She sips coffee alone. Ten minutes left for quiet reading. At least she's done one thing worthwhile this morning, forcing 25 teenagers to read Dostoyevsky for 20 minutes. Surely that will benefit society, or humanity, or these budding adults, or whomever it is she's here for.

She skims the assignment for today so she can participate in discussion. Part III, Chapter 2. Razumhin meeting with Raskolnikov's sister and mother. Raskolnikov is absent, or asleep, having had a hard night, psychic troubles on account of having killed a woman or two. She reacquaints herself with passages she's marked over the years, which is most everything minus phrases like "hopelessly unattainable," "positively ashamed," "muttered with a feeling of self-abasement," "cried," "furious," "wept," "ecstasy," "declared hotly," "hugged him warmly," breathless anguish desperate joy. So many exclamation points! She despises this over-dramatic, over-precise, over-spelled-out aspect of Dostoyevsky. She could do without every moment mattering so much!

Ah yes, she reminds herself, this is the scene where Razhumin describes Raskolnikov, where he says Raskolnikov loves no one and perhaps never will, and some business about the narcissistic and covetous Luzhin. There, discussion topics, done.

Halfway through the chapter she gets bored and skips ahead to pages she dog-eared when she was roughly nineteen.

"Vague and objectless anxiety in the present, and in the future a continual sacrifice leading to nothing – that was all that lay before him. And what comfort was it to him that at the end of eight years he would only be 32 and able to begin a new life! What had he to live for? What had he to look forward to? Why should he strive? To live in order to exist?"

She looks at the clock. "Good God," she thinks aloud in her head, "A month to get them as far as they are, and it'll take me another month to get them to here, and most will never make it here, let alone the redemption."

She shuts her book in despair and sighs longingly.

"Time is up." Eyes bob. "What shall we discuss?" Eyes glaze. "Any questions?" Eyes fry in a vat of lard. "They don't have to be deep questions." Eyes are dunked in purchased coffee. "Do you know what's happening in the plot?" Their eyes are donut holes, gone. "Who are these people?" Diversified mutual funds, bundled mortgage securities, paper trails, gone. Dixie cups, gone. Faith, gone.

She realizes she will have to lead them.

She talks for 20 minutes. The bell rings. They leave.

She has three free periods and four classes. She doesn't like to phrase it this way; it makes her into a whiner who works half a day and squeals in agony. She cannot use the word agony with a straight face in regards to her agony. What makes one a whiner is tone of voice. If she doesn't speak, she can't whine. She doesn't want anyone to know her agony; she wants them to know she's a hard worker, one that doesn't whine about all the work she has to do.

There is more work to be done during free periods than there is time in the free periods.

She goes to the bathroom. 19 seconds of peeing. She's done better and worse, but 19 seconds is satisfactory.

She shouldn't have more coffee. She stops by the office for her mug. There's a 50/50 chance, she figures, she'll see somebody in the faculty room, but that's okay, the faculty room is the place for that.

There are no goodies in the faculty room. No sex in the champagne room. Wrong, that's a song. Mondays and Fridays are better shots for that, not Wednesdays. "So it goes," she says, and then wants to crawl out of her skin and leave it there for having said it. At least she's alone. She wonders if she's ever had an original thought.

Ward, a math teacher, comes in and says, "Cookies?" while she empties the coffee pot into her mug.

"No," she says.

"Dang," he says.

"Yeah," she says.

"Did you finish it?" he says, pointing with his mug at the pot.

"Yeah," she says.

"Dang," he says.

"I'll make more," she says, "But it'll be a couple minutes."

She'll make more; she finished the pot after all, and she pulls her weight. There's nothing more annoying than coming into the faculty room to an empty coffee pot, and really those people who finish a coffee pot and then walk away without starting another must be so self-absorbed and unaware of any societal obligation – she doesn't know how they can live with themselves, morally speaking. She tries to make up bogus excuses for them about being late for class, being too intimidated by the school's coffee hubbub, being new to coffee pot etiquette, being in mourning for a loved one, but empathy is hard.

She'd prefer Ward went away. He is young and handsome and earnest and single, but she doesn't like to prep the coffee maker while somebody watches. She is plenty experienced, but coffee is a touchy subject around school. Everyone knows the right way to do it.

"Oh don't worry, I can do it," he says.

"No, no. I finished it," she assures him.

"Sure, but I'll be drinking it," he reaches to take the pot from her.

"No," she says, "I'm quite experienced," and then feels a little bad, so she counters his outstretched hand with her brimming mug that she doesn't wash, but which says "Grade A Teacher." "Here, have mine. I can wait. I don't have anything else to do, and... it looks like you could use it."

He pauses. "No, thank you. I ... I prefer fresh coffee." He steps back. "How do you make it?"

"Filtered water." She never uses filtered water, but he's a math teacher. There is a right answer. "Fourteen scoops." She'll sneak in a fifteenth if he's not looking.

"It's a 12-cup carafe."

Carafe? "Yes, that's what it says."

"A little stronger than I like, but at least you use filtered water."

She washes the pot out at least ten times longer than she would otherwise and slowly dies waiting for it to fill from the filter. While she dies, they talk about a struggling student. He asks about how her former advisee's holding up, if it's rough having an advisee expelled. She instead talks about Max, about how she's worried about kindergarten next year, about how she can't decide whether or not to have him come here

because of the cost, even at half tuition.

It's a decent conversation. It ends.

Ward spreads some papers full of plusses and minuses and integral symbols on the table for something to do while the coffee brews.

"I like to be efficient," he offers.

"Me too," she reciprocates.

She stands there a moment more, he sitting, looking up at her, glasses sliding down his nose. He looks down, through them, focusing.

She returns to her office.

Twenty minutes before class. On the internet, she looks up the weekend weather. Rain. It's March in the Pacific Northwest. She imagines it's raining right now, two internal and one external walls away. She and Max are going to the waterfront this weekend. If they don't, they'll kill each other. Fuck the rain. She could use a good rain.

She checks her e-mail. Twelve unread. Before she reads them, she checks the postings on the official business high school mandatory reading online bulletin board. Eight unread. Before she reads them, she checks the non-official school business bulletin board. Five postings, 15 responses. Topics of the day: dog for sale, free biosolid fertilizer, political history documentary on PBS tonight, Japanese teacher's husband having a play reading, the re-re-re revised instructions on how to comply with coffee-making mandate and penalties for non-compliance, per meeting 122 of the Coffee Cartel Committee, which has received 12 of the 15 responses.

"What can I do to be more efficient?" she thinks.

She could use a dog. Max'd like it, and it would give her more to do that didn't necessitate an existential crisis. She's sick of existential crises, depressed with being depressed, bored with herself. A dog eliminates inwardness, self-reflection, and the contemplated life. If you don't walk the dog, she shits in the living room. If you don't feed her, she dies. If you don't love her, she won't love you. That's not true, she thinks.

"Yes," she cracks, "I need more dependency."

She calls the Department of Social and Health Services while she checks e-mail. DSHS puts her on hold. She is the epitome of efficiency, on hold while checking e-mail. She feels good. Combine two soul-sucking activities and create one productive task. Two negatives equal a positive. Two birds, one stone. David with a slingshot positively shooting the shit out of some damn big birds.

She has never called DSHS and been on hold for less than half-an-hour. Usually, when she gets through, they can't answer her questions. They cover Max's healthcare premiums through her school plan, as well as provide secondary insurance for whatever her school doesn't cover. They essentially ensure she has no healthcare costs related to Max. But last month she didn't receive the \$247 reimbursement check for his premium. She thinks she sent in a copy of her pay stub, but she's not positive.

High school bulletin board postings on absences, athletics, technology department call for proposals, scheduled network shutdown, faculty development opportunity, update your curriculum map online using an inane program that makes the task take twice as long as it should to do something that doesn't need doing, and, marked URGENT, posted at 7:30 a.m. Wednesday, a schedule change. "All classes today are 10 minutes shorter due

to a performance by the drama department ...”

She blushes. She waited for the bell. Did the students know? Did they let her continue to blather to see her become an ass? Was it worth it to them? She talked for 10 needless minutes that nobody enjoyed. They suffered together for 10 more minutes than necessary.

No no no – suck on cloud nine. All classes are 10 minutes shorter! Only two-thirds of an hour! Other teachers will be bitching about the lack of time with their students, but not her. Let’s watch a play everyday and do nothing! Forget curriculum, forget progress, forget achievement, classes are 10 minutes shorter! She will make it through the day! Let there be light!

Thunder in the halls. Fine print. The performance is over. Class begins...now. She has prepared nothing, but she doesn’t care, 10 minutes less class, three more classes – 30 minutes saved. Thirty minutes less to the day. She loves math. She hangs up the phone. She grabs *Hamlet* by the neck and drags his corpse to class.

This is her normal class, as opposed to her advanced class, itself in opposition to Advanced Placement, which she does not teach, thank God. At a school like this, the administration and especially the parents examine the final numbers of the students taking the AP exam to evaluate teacher performance. Teaching AP English is a competitive sport, the teacher coaching the class to compete against every other AP class in the country; the mean closest to 5 wins and not everyone is allowed a 5. Why play? To qualify for more prestigious educational institutions. To manufacture products who will be successful in the marketplace. Bolster the economy and augment the future hegemony of the current trademark of corporate paper tiger capitalism.

She turns to the board and gags a bit as her students work behind her. That is how education is argued: economy.

If you want economic stimulation, lock a 17-year-old boy and girl in a windowless room for 24 hours with nothing but a copy of anything ever written by D.H. Lawrence, or *Another Country* by Baldwin, or even Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers* – she never went in for that sort of business, but Dave ... the modern saleable consciousness stream and the post-modern derivative heated his hot plate, cooked his Ramen, and boiled his blood. But that was back when they were poor grad students and every little movement was a ramrod loading a charge. They lived on water and noodles and smokes and sex and wanted for nothing. She wouldn’t sell that now for the world.

The primary reason she has no desire to teach AP is that the exam is in essay format and she doesn’t want to be judged by her ability to teach writing.

The students, in small groups, are learning about leadership, compromise, decision-making, and *Hamlet*. They are choosing a scene to perform for the class, and discussing concept, style, and intent for the scene. If time remains, they are to begin blocking.

She feels brilliant. They’ll rehearse; they’ll perform; they’ll murder it, over and over, and it will kill weeks.

The idea came to her as she entered the classroom and Dominique – whose original parents divorced and remarried the exes of another divorced couple, the male of which, being Dominique’s stepfather, is Sandy’s uncle – ogled Sandy as she bent to put her iPod in her bag, and as she then held the position, rummaging, because she was learning.

Dominique is smart but doesn't work hard. Sandy works hard but isn't smart.

She put Dominique and Sandy in the same group against her teacherly instincts, and with her instinctual instincts. Sure enough, they pick *Get Thee to a Nunnery*. She is excited, and a little frightened. Playing God has its plusses and minuses.

She has forbidden her students from cutting a word from their edition. Any sane modern director would cut, cut, cut. She loves Shakespeare, but he uses too many words. All she's figured out that writing is, is caring enough to make a reader care. She doesn't know how you teach that. She doesn't know how you do that. Except that it's something more than the logic of an argument, the structure of a narrative arc, the choice of a word, or the advanced placement of a comma.

She walks from group to group and acts like a teacher so they can all play the illusion that she is keeping them on task. She invented a performance date, at which point they will be evaluated, but it is distant yet and this is now.

One group chooses the Graveyard scene. She wants to kiss them, or rather one unruly-haired boy in particular, James, who is fired up about the project in a very non-linear and mostly unproductive way, but she doesn't because she'd get fired. There'd be nothing sexual in it. She wouldn't use her tongue, only her lips and his cheek, and she wouldn't linger, but she'd be publicly stoned, and she has a son, and for some reason this job and others' viewpoints are more important to her than random displays of honest and sincere affection.

She wonders if she can inspire him to write a paper with a pet thesis, "The concept of the 'Sea Change' in 'Hamlet' is 'bunk.'" Look at the text, she implores him, there is no evidence for his change, and even if there is, it's just a cheap dramatic move to ship him off to England for a few scenes, have him supposedly metamorphose off-stage, murder a few ex-friends, and then suddenly return one with his fate – which is to have a finger in everyone's death. Besides, look at the graveyard scene, she talks faster in her thinking. You've held the skull in your hand and asked why, you know why it's funny, you know he's still the same old Hamlet asking a skull why.

She stops whispering to him in her head.

She wonders if she can inspire.

Perhaps inspiration is inappropriate.

James fervently interrupts her thoughts and theorizes that class is over, citing a clutched printout of today's schedule. She was waiting for the bell. She becomes a bell and rings. They all look at her, some surprised, some confused, some stirred. They love her for a moment and lunge doorward.

The class was a success, over before she knew it, before it began. They enjoyed *Hamlet*; she enjoyed them; she enjoyed herself.

Homework: Continue on, more of the same.

She checks her e-mail. She calls DSHS, listens to a dumbed-down electronic version of *The Rite of Spring*. Baby Stravinsky: a ball floats across her screen and changes colors, moving much slower than the music and improving her math skills. Improved math skills only dumbfound her more as to why the state hasn't paid her for her son's healthcare.

She e-mails back parents, counselors, advisers, grandparents, administrators, aunts, deans. She has multiple struggling students in her advisory and classes. Every year,

struggling students. Not everybody gets an A. Everybody wants one, or has learned not to. She should call the parents because they are worried about their kid and they deserve it, but she doesn't, because she is a parent on hold with DSHS to drum up money for her son's healthcare.

"That's not true," she tells herself. "You wouldn't call them anyway. You'd send an e-mail, and it'd take ten times as long as picking up the phone because you'd worry the words like a rosary."

"Fine, but look who's on the phone getting her money, smarty pants."

"There's nothing smart in pants."

One of her advisees was caught buying a dime bag on campus and expelled two weeks ago. He dropped it, left it in front of the school, and somebody found it. She had liked him; he'd never given her any trouble, good student, wasn't struggling. She'd lost sleep over it, cried about it with his mom on the phone, thinking about how bad she must feel for her son, cried about it alone, imagining how he must feel, incapacitated, shackled by the stomach to a boulder creeping down a mountain. Before being expelled, the dean had asked him how he could prove to them that they could trust him again. "I can't," he said. "You can't," he said. He did not elaborate. It was not what the dean wanted to hear. The dean wanted the boy to use words to illuminate his wrongdoing, express his remorse, explain how he'd redeem himself. But she knew this wasn't that kind of boy. He was the kind of boy who swallowed words. Words were a letdown. Words were not strong enough for his freight. He had given the honest answer, if not the right one.

The last time she saw him, he stared at his hands, waiting for his father. She wanted to console him, to hold him. All she could say was, "Look, it was stupid. Feel bad about it and move on. There are other schools. And in the end, it's only school." It was not what a teacher was supposed to say, but it was what she said.

Some division of her wants to call him and see how he's holding up, but he's gone, along with the legitimacy of their relationship.

That has all blown over, a cloud on memory. Nobody talks about him anymore.

She sends e-mails about Johnny, Sara, Sam, Jane, Rafael, Ishmael. More boys than girls. Girls are better self-motivators. Girls meet or exceed expectations.

She writes the same thing over and over again. So and so is doing better at this, worse at this. So and so is missing that assignment. So and so tells you they are trying harder, but when I see them during free periods, they are socializing or texting or playing Frisbee on the green, sun-drenched or puddle-splashed lawn, not far from the strawberry tree. When I see them during lunch they are eating.

She clicks "Send," defeating the urge to P.S. – Your kid is fine if he gets a C. Playing guitar makes him happy, not reading, and that's okay. There are more things in heaven and earth. I myself hope Max turns out different than I and has an ear for music. I wish I played an instrument, but I don't, so I hope he will. It seems doubtful, considering the example I set.

She sneezes and drips a little.

She imagines the urge to write something like that is what makes her a bad teacher.

She imagines, having written the postscript, her good drunk friend Razumhin telling her, "You almost convinced him again of the truth of all that hideous nonsense, and then you suddenly – put out your tongue at him! He is crushed, annihilated now! It was masterly by Jove, it's what they deserve!"

To annihilate and be annihilated. Razumhin was a good man, and good men are hard to find.

When the writing becomes too painful, she uncrooks her neck and sets the receiver on the desk to play its digital Prokofiev into plastic-coated particleboard. She knows the DSHS case worker will pick up while she's gone and talk to the desk, which in its self-centeredness will not lend her a hand and ask about her money. The caseworker will hang up, and all the time on hold will be wasted. She knows this, but she can't vacate herself from the pain anymore.

She scurries to the bathroom, pees, and scurries back, avoiding eye contact with a few students sitting in the hall.

The desk listens to a dial tone.

She wants to cry, but she doesn't do that in school.

She goes to class. In spite of the math, it feels no shorter. She does the Dostoyevsky dance again. It turns out somewhat different with different people.

Lunch. Burger and fries. In line, she apologizes to the drama teacher for missing the performance. He understands. She tells him something of her *Hamlet* project. He talks for a bit about Shakespeare and high school students. She spaces. She doesn't think of anything else. She has always found that dialogue does not easily hold her present. She re-enters the moment and the conversation is over and there is a burger and fries and ketchup squirted on her pea-green tray. Two-handed, she carries it to her office, where it's not raining, where she will eat ground cow while she wikipedias a certain breed of dog – labradoodle, a Frankenstein of a name, though the post advertised “docile, social, playful, cute, easily trained, and perfect for kids!” – where she will close the door to muzzle the din and where the little molecules of burger and fry that constitute smell will soak into the walls, permeate her clothes, absorb into her flaking epithelial tissue, and be actively transported into the live cells beneath her skin.

She has one class in the afternoon today, last period. “Easy day,” she reminds herself, “Three-quarters bagged, thank God.”

After she discovers labradoodles are the best thing since gene splicing and commodity futures speculation, she stares at the wall. A picture of Max hangs there, on a tricycle. The picture is on a nail, not a trike. Misplaced participles, dangling modifiers. She'd throw mechanics out the window if she had one. The picture hangs from the nail, and therefore so does Max, squeezing the trike between his legs so it doesn't fall to her feet, a framed moment of time holding for dear life to a little boy and a little string and a little nail spiked inexpertly into a slab of drywall, gravity slowly untying, eroding the will, wearing out curled, pudgy fingers; forearms scream and weaken and gravity strengthens by the inverse square of distance; gravity gains power as the picture descends through floor and dirt and rock and magma; gravity pulls the dead moment toward its center to crush it into itself.

Gravity is not a thing but a force, she dismisses herself.

This picture replaced the picture of Max and Dave, Max in a pack, atop a mountain,

which she took down so some poor student didn't ask. That picture had replaced the close-up of Max as an infant that she hung to help her letdown for pumping. It never helped. Mostly it made her sad.

March. Time for new leaves.

She wishes she could pump. The machine is still in its professional-looking black case on the shelf, sheened in two years of dust. The blackout paper is still over the window in the door. She hated pumping. She pumped three times a day to produce two bottles worth. She held the collection cups to her breasts so they wouldn't lose suction. While she was being pumped she couldn't do anything but stare at Max's picture or at a static screen or watch her nipples react to changes of pressure: grow, extend, spit milk through skin, and then retreat to collect another mouthful. Handless, she could also pray that she locked the door, that a tech worker or maintenance man wouldn't just knock and unlock and come in, that she'd brought extra storage bottles for the faculty fridge so she didn't have to pour the milk in a glass and label it hers with a strip of masking tape.

But now she wouldn't mind feeling like a cow. A cow produces. As a cow, she kept her son alive several times a day. As a cow, she saved his life and saved his life and saved his life.

She still prays the door won't open, every minute of every day, not to anyone, not with words, but as a longing she is so used to she doesn't often think about it.

She could plug in, help the machine's mouths achieve suction, whisper to them "there," and let them work both sides of her at the same time. She wonders what that would feel like. Would it feel good? Would it ache? Would it feel like nothing? Would she produce milk, or something else, or nothing?

She is strong. She fights curiosity. She turns out the light so she won't be disturbed. Instead of milk in High-Flow Mother Pro, she inputs numbers in Gradebook Pro and straps on headphones and cranks up "Evenflow." Data entry, grade computation, number crunching, plug and chug, monkey work by monitor glow. She switches to the next album, and then the next, *Vitalogy*, because she can't listen to the same music she listened to in high school. She can't. "Bugs," "Satan's Bed," "Hey Foxymophandlemama, That's Me," and lastly "Immortality" on repeat. She rocks to old Pearl Jam in a dark box with no windows while her fingers work keys and her mind releases.

She is a conduit for numbers. Time passes quickly.

It doesn't take nearly as long as she'd like.

Light. Door, desk, computer, phone, phone, phone. Not today. Tomorrow she'll collect. In class she'll have everyone pull out their cell phones and call DSHS. First one through gets a cut of the money, which they'll pay back to her for a good grade.

She can't plan for tomorrow because she can't imagine tomorrow. Or rather, she thinks in the third person about herself, she can't imagine tomorrow being different than today. She can't plan for tomorrow because she has yet to accomplish today's goal, which is to survive today.

By default, she lives day-to-day, kneeling to today and not tomorrow.

Tomorrow, they'll discuss *Crime and Punishment* and rehearse *Hamlet*.

She picks up a stack of papers. Once a week, her students claw out an in-class essay. Once a book, they skewer a full-fledged paper. They earn bonus points for maintaining a

field journal with thoughts, responses, and ideas inspired by the book. The idea is for them to learn to think critically.

She's never had time to read the journals; she flips the pages like old-fashioned moving picture books, takes a snapshot of a quantity of words, and awards a subjective number of bonus points.

She rarely finishes grading the short weekly essays in a week. Add on the analytical reports, and paper accumulates exponentially. Linearly, she corrects, though exponentially is a better word, if tired. If the papers reproduced of their own accord, producing more than two of themselves in one rut, that would be exponential.

She is glad, for once, that all these papers are merely verbal masturbation.

She recently dumped four classes' worth of three weekly sets of dirtied sheets in the recycling dumpster to destroy the evidence.

She disappears slurries of stupid thoughts daily. Slews of thoughts daily. Lewds of thought.

She fingers the top paper and reads the first sentence. "Both Dickens and Dostoyevsky write about death and poverty during the Russian Industrial Revolution."

No spelling mistakes. The student had copied Dostoyevsky from the board without transposing or omitting or making up letters, no small feat. It helps that the student wears large shoes. The essay is in response to the question, "Contrast and compare the styles of Dickens and Dostoyevsky." Who thought of such a fecal question, she interrogates feebly. The advanced class had just read *A Tale of Two Cities* because she had been looking for something easier. The course: *Literature of the World Throughout History*. It is an arrogant course. They'd read excerpts of *Genji and Heike* and *The Monkey and Don Quixote* and *Canterbury Tales*, but had read all of nothing, until Dickens, and now Dostoyevsky. There isn't time, or comprehension. It's a life's work. She still wants to fit in something American, and European, and Latin American, and modern. *Walden* or *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Camus, some Borges or Marquez, a story from *Dubliners* (written when Joyce was 25), or *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* if she wants to throw two shits to the wind and let their heads hit the fan.

When she had proposed the course, she had been excited, as had the administration, probably because it was her first sign of ambition in five years. Let's jump around the globe and progress through history! But she discovered students were no fun to travel with. She wants to go home.

This is far from the worst answer to the question. It was a bad question. A bad question omits the possibility of a good answer. She prefers textual analysis questions, but the woman she was that particular day, who thankfully no longer exists, had to think up a question on the spot, with the class staring at her, pens poised poetically.

If she applied the same kind of textual analysis to this young woman's sentence as she expects from her students, she might appreciate the metaphorical implication of death and poverty, or explore the intentional choice of "Russian Industrial Revolution" – how it implies that England is like Russia, how Dickens was in a way Russian, how we are all Russian, how Russia is still undergoing an industrial revolution, how the Cold War was a war with ourselves, how we are still warring with the industrial revolution in ourselves. But authors who merit textual analysis are dead, and this student is only dead in the eyes. She marks it wrong like she's a Math teacher.

Wrong question, wrong answer. Wrong place, wrong time.

She watches the clock. She kills time waiting for it to get better. She kills time to give it substance. She kills time to love it. She murders one second after the other, this one an ear-poisoned father, that one a wine-poisoned mother, an uncle skewered, a brother bit by his poisoned tip, a friend betrayed, a lover driven insane, an idiot interfering with another blade, a greedy woman axed, an innocent woman axed, herself axed. She does nothing. She does it all.

Jane stops by. Jane teaches English. Jane talks about something. Jane speaks English. Jane's words are not hard to understand. Jane is trying to say something besides what Jane is saying.

That's so English, she thinks. She laughs at a weird pause in the conversation. Jane leaves.

Time – killed dead. Time for class.

She spells out the *Hamlet* performance project again, though it turns out somewhat different with different people.

The din of adolescence thumping in her ears, she locks her office door and takes her clothes off. She puts on tighter, thinner, more comfortable attire. She stalls for 15 minutes to let the hallways clear and the parking lot empty. On the way out, she drops her bags in the car, does some cursory stretches, hamstrings, thighs, calves, and groin, and runs away from campus.

She runs along the road, to the water.

The clouds spit, but sucker holes open to the blue beyond the gray ceiling. Occasionally, the clouds break enough to admit the sun. She feels good. She feels bad leaving Max at daycare an extra hour, but he's better off with her better balanced, and she is pretty sure he has more fun at daycare than at home anyhow.

She cuts through the cemetery, where there's no traffic and no eyes and lots of worms. Chunks of cement and granite and marble and spreading oaks and sky-scraping firs and red-peeling madronas, and now crocuses – purple, yellow, white; daffodils – yellow, white; and bluebells – a color she'll call purple, for rhythm. Too early yet for tulips. Tulips would break the rhythm. Two lips would be two too many. Two lips would break her rhythm like a second y, like an ax to the face, like a kiss.

And there, a groundskeeper – old, bearded, overalled, perennial-planting. Maybe in her next life she'll be a groundskeeper in a graveyard. She passes the thought with an exercise of speed.

Through the cemetery, across the street, the path on the bluff overlooking the water. She stops and breathes heavily and looks at the former industrial site below, a quarry become golf course, at the bay, at a ferry crawling to the island sheltering the penitentiary, at the Olympic Mountains minus their peaks closeted in cloud, at the blue patches of sky through the worn quilt of gray.

She turns around and runs back.

Ten years ago she would've run and run along the path to encounter as much as she could. She would have slipped through a chained gate, snuck through the abandoned

quarry and its relics of industry, hopped multiple fences and crossed railroad tracks and ignored "No Trespassing" signs and slid down to where water meets land. She would have disrobed and jumped in the water and thrashed for a good 15 seconds and that would've been enough. She would've reemerged blue. She would've found a patch of sun to stand in, and turned pink. She would close her eyes, lift her face, and let herself be warmed. Her skin would tighten, her hairs drip, her nipples stand at attention. She would dream of a man who would do the same with her. They would talk about the mountains, then climb them. They would talk about children, then have them. They would talk about the sun, then find a patch of it and settle down.

She contents herself with what she has. A 30-minute run, slick sweat, heavy breathing.

"I feel better for it," she says to no one.

Max puts his head down and runs full tilt from the swingset to the gate and crashes into her arms. He hugs her. She wraps around him, ties her hands behind his back, and pulls him in, in, and in. She guzzles. She wishes this to be the last thing she feels, her boy in her arms, her son, squeezing and squeezed with unqualified love.

He wears different pants. He wet himself again. "He was too busy playing," says the daycare lady.

"Yes," she swallows, "You have to force him to use the pot. Wring it out of him."

She is supposed to take something from him, something he wants, a toy, a ball, a car. That was the deal, pee your pants and lose an object you covet. He has to learn; he's four years old; he goes to school next year.

She doesn't have the heart to teach him a lesson.

She is tired of telling kids to stop leaning back in their chairs when she leaned back in her chair, of chastising them to pay attention when she can't pay attention, of teaching them to build logical, incisive arguments when logic undercuts relationships, of caring about things she doesn't care about because it's her job. Let him pee himself. Let him drown the world. Fuck it. Dostoyevsky was an epileptic. He had a gambling addiction. He suffered in Siberia. He wrote a book or two that have an element of truth to them and that she identifies with on some level, and so she seizes herself by the hair and drags herself out of bed to clench a pen between her teeth and spasm on a table and teach Dostoyevsky and try to bluff that feeling of reading him, of writing in the black morning, of fondling words, into a job. It is a moral hazard to work to be a feeling. She risks her savings for some unwordable feeling. She tries to bring a feeling to life with an ax.

Her son is in her arms, and she is frowning at his pants.

Pills. She's thought about pills. Doctors and pills. She's talked to psychiatrists, counselors. She used to talk to her husband. She talks to herself. Her question for all of them is, Why are they so privy? She has friends. She talks to them. They wrote books and they died. This conversation is old as words. She asks the analysts, What do you want from your life? They say, To be happy. She agrees, but they mean different things. When their meanings converge, then they can talk. Otherwise it's words; it's talking to yourself;

it's emotional manipulation. She doesn't need to talk to someone to be made aware of her issues. Pills. Maybe her chemicals are unbalanced. Maybe she reuptakes serotonin quicker than experts recommend. What fun is balance? A world of happy people; a world without joy. She runs and reads and laughs and cries. The problem is, though she often doesn't like who she is, she'd rather be herself than someone she likes. Perhaps one day, if she gets ugly enough, she'll find some pills and they'll make everything in the mirror better. She can't believe existence would be as sweet without it verging on rot. No mountains without valleys, and all those other sayings she can't bring herself to say. No belief without doubt. She cringes at her unspoken words, but it's better than a flatline.

"Fuck it," she breathes. Why not? Nobody waits for them at home.

"Fox," Max says, which is what she's taught him to say. He's a good kid. She turns red, then laughs and hunts him up in the rearview mirror, strapped three ways to Sunday in his seat.

"I'm really screwing you up, eh kiddo?"

"Are you okay, Mommy? It's okay. It's okay. Are you tired? Are you hungry? Did you hurt yourself? It's okay."

"I'm just a little giddy, but that's not the point, I am so sad, so sad ..."

"Oh, you're sad, Mommy?"

"Yes, I'm sad. I'm Dostoyevsky."

"It's okay. It's okay."

"I'm Raskolnikov doing a hatchet job."

"You're not Roscoecof, you're Mommy!" He giggles behind her at the 4-year running joke. She pretends she's something she's not and he calls her out, or she pretends he is something he's not, an eagle, a dinosaur, Pablo Neruda, and he calls her out. His imagination has yet to outlast hers. She's teaching him solid grounding.

"You want to go to the water?"

"I want to go to park."

"Yeah, we'll go to the park on the water."

"I want to spin."

"You're already spinning. We're on a planet."

"I want to spin!"

"We're not going to spin. You fell and about bashed your head in last time you got off that thing. We're going to a different park, the one on the water. With boats and dogs and mountains and sand. You'll throw rocks at the ocean."

That is what they do. The tide is in, though on its way out. They don't have much beach, but it's growing and all theirs. No dogs, no people, no sandcastles. A weekday, nearing dinnertime. There's a lot of sky now between the peaks of the Olympics and the lee edge of the clouds sweeping east. A colder night tonight for the roofless, but drier. And starred. They search for sharks, dolphins, octopi, killer whales, giant squid, flying fish, scrabbling crabs, starfish, sea horses, geoducks. They see nothing. They see waves. They throw rocks at the Sound, their corner of the ocean. Max wants to run into the water, but she convinces him he'll be cold and miserable. He chases receding waves and flees approaching ones. He wets his feet, and that's enough of that.

They straddle a big length of driftwood, a toppled trunk. Their feet dangle as they

ride a horse, now an alligator, now a whale, a giant white whale out past the yacht, out past the container barge, under the bridge and around the islands and past the mountains and beyond the peninsula, to where they can't see, to the open ocean, violent and big, she tells him as she holds him tight so he won't fall overboard, very big, bigger than we can see.

They stop at a grocery store to get food. That's what you do at a grocery store, get food. Stop being redundant. Stop being so intellectually obnoxious, she tells herself. A grocery, not a grocery store. Anymore, you can buy anything you want at a grocery. All goods have become as necessary as food. A portable DVD player, a flat screen, a G-string, a bouquet of whatever color you like, a coffee maker, whichever you want, one that can turn itself on at 4:30 in the morning, it's the best part of waking up, or perhaps you want a percolator, or a French press, personal and family size, or an espresso machine and don't forget the coffee grinder along with filters and cheap coffee and shade-grown coffee – rainforest in your cup – and buy a plot of equatorial forest to save it with your replacement pot for when yours cracks, or perhaps if you're looking to be economical in these hard times you can fill the crack with your glass G-string. Things are getting better; it'll all work out. You're too smart for that, she tells herself. Yes, that's one of your problems, she sasses back.

Max is whining because he wants it all. Cookies, chips, bananas, grapes, yogurt, cottage cheese, beer – put a name to it and he wants it. Or don't and he does. She tries for sympathy; it's her fault after all that he's hungry. It's her fault they had to go have fun at the ocean. It's her fault they had to ride a log on a long journey, unprepared with snacks.

But she could do without the histrionics. Whining and over-dramatizing are not clever ways to get what he wants.

She opens a box of crackers he blubbers about and hands it to him and he throws it to the ground, spilling crackers like milk because now he wants the grapes and she wants to throw him up and over the canned goods into the next aisle and walk away and let him fend.

She explains in a calm voice drowned by his screams about how eating grapes before they pay is stealing because they pay by weight, as if she believes it matters, as if she feels some societal obligation to not shortchange this huge chain grocery store, as if she doesn't feel she has a right to steal a few cents to make her son shut up and be happy when it's this store's purpose – with its economy of scale and coupons and advertising – to capitalize on her, to make money off her, as if stealing a few grapes will trickle down to negatively effect the grape pickers and growers in Chile (paid in dimes and happy, they have to be happy) the only people in the chain of supply she feels allegiance to, other than perhaps the truckers and the truck loaders and the shelf stockers and the old man pushing the broom and the teenage check stand girl. As if she feels like she owes it to the economy. Some theoretical economy, when her son is bawling right here, grapeshot oozing from his eyes.

But that's just what a mother does – she doesn't steal grapes, and she makes her son cry in grocery stores.

She doesn't want to be such a mother.

She gives him a grape or two or 12. She feeds him some crackers off the ground. She

peels him a banana and plants the peel behind a 2-liter of Coke Zero. When she pays, she forgets to take the box of saved crackers from Max to be scanned. The cashier doesn't care and she doesn't care, so it's all right.

Mac-and-cheese, because what she doesn't need now is another fight about food. And because it has to be fast. She has a beer because. She wonders if Emerson had days like this. Everyday is like this. Dostoyevsky surely did, the epileptic. Raskolnikov did; he told her, even put it in writing, drew up a prenup.

She beers herself because a beer makes it fun. A touch of ferment makes cooking an act to enjoy, not just to be done. She boils water; Max plays his trumpet.

Max says dinner is very very very very very very good. He says, "I'm a lion," and buries his face in the bowl like it's an elephant carcass and, like any spiritually minded hunter, he wants to eat the heart first. He comes up for air, cheeks and forehead and hair macaronied. "Thank you, Mommy," he says.

"Anytime, bucko, anytime."

Time for bed. Past time. They played in the sea. No bath tonight. She doesn't believe in daily baths. He smells like the ocean. Teeth, books, songs. Another song, because he asked. She doesn't want to say no. Lights out.

"Good night, Max. I love you. Good night."

She steps outside for the mail. She inhales outside air, exhales inside air. She looks for stars and finds a few. Not many in the city. She likes the cold air, the being outside, the not being inside. She wants to stay out longer, but has no reason to. For not the first time, she wishes she smoked. She's a teacher, a mother, and never liked the smoke taste or the lung ache, but still, a cigarette is a reason to pause and stand outside and do nothing but inhale, exhale, enjoy two minutes of relief.

A car crawls by. A neighbor's door slams and someone comes out. She goes in.

She slits an envelope and disgorges its contents and continues her oversight of the flushing of her retirement. She doesn't care. The school continues to withdraw the mandatory amount from her check and give it to a professional investment firm that is certified to piss it away. She doesn't care. What would she use the money for? To buy Max a TV, a cell phone, a handheld gaming device? To buy herself a handle of whiskey? Fly to South America, visit the Andes? They might not come back, and then what? As it is, she'll still go see a play if she wants. They'll always have the ocean. Who needs to buy clothes? She has made the discovery that adult clothes last longer than most adults. She doesn't get why an industrial revolution was woven of textiles, or why when people stop buying crappily stitched cloth their jobs and therefore their worth will be lost like loose change in holey pockets. She doesn't understand spending to save the economy. Wasn't the point of the Industrial Revolution a reduction of labor?

What the draining of her funds makes her think is, "Why am I still working?"

She doesn't do the dishes; she doesn't grade; she doesn't prepare for tomorrow.

"I feel stifled," she narrates to herself passionately.

"Stifled?" she responds inquisitively.

"Unable to do what I want to do," she clarifies with a plaintive wail.

"What do you want to do?" she inquires responsively, sympathetically, and analytically.

"I don't know," she elucidates desperately.

Maybe she'll sell the house for dirt and buy an old truck and a camper and they'll move to the desert, to the middle of nowhere, and live on nothing. Do people really live like that? Or is it a thing of the past, of Kerouac and Moses and Christian eremites? Maybe instead she'll buy a boat even though she knows nothing about boats except what Melville confided to her, and Melville is dead, killed by Moby Dick. There is always someone to pay, she thinks, someone with an open hand. Blowholes. Your choice comes down to what tricks you want to subject yourself to.

The problem is, she has this soul that just isn't worth anything.

She collapses on the couch, a shot star, a burst cloud, a fallen market, an axed angel, a whored heart. She tries not to be a teary eye. No one is starving, no one is homeless, no one is diseased, no one is dying, no one is in Siberia, no one married her husband's brother. Her husband went away, but she's always been alone. She has a son, and he rides whales. She has a good life, which is a stupid thing to cry about, and a cliché. It's okay to be smart and cringe at clichés, but it's such a waste to cry about them.

How much joy does one person need? "How addicted you are to your greed," she screams to herself so no one else hears.

She will not take these thoughts to bed. If the thoughts will take her, let them do it on the couch. She won't spill their spelling on the sheets.

She will go to bed, she will, but not for some time. She fights tears. She loses. She fights her desire to fight the tears. She fights dirty, with nails and teeth, pulling hair and gouging eyes, drawing tears and scrawling blood. She doesn't care if she's expelled; she has to fight. If she doesn't risk it, there will be no rising tomorrow to teach and mother. She is nothing without a fight. She fights.

END

About Nick Stokes

Nick Stokes writes novels, plays, fictions, nothings, arrangements, pieces of prose, and other undefinables. He lives mostly or mostly lives in Washington; he packs mules in the backcountry of Montana; he's been elsewhere. Among other explorations, circa 2014, he's working on an immersive (anti)-choose-your-own-adventure novel. His novel AFFAIR was recently serialized and released as an ebook by The Seattle Star. He's been a finalist for many awards; he's received a few. His other writings can be found in dark crannies, in magazines sometimes known as journals, and around the web for dirt cheap or less. For dissemination, refer to <http://www.nickstokes.net>.

Other Titles by Nick Stokes

Novels:

Affair

You Choose ... (forthcoming)

Novelette:

1 Day

Stories:

An End

Rise, then Descend

What Never Happened, an Observation

(others forthcoming)

Short, Flash, or Nothing Prose:

(numerous but for the moment you must search the web and on occasion read paper)

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